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SUBJECT: FATAH CONGRESS: ON DAY TWO, QUESTIONS REMAIN ON
POLITICAL MESSAGE AND LEADERSHIP ELECTIONS

REF: JERUSALEM 1345

Classified By: Consul General Jake Walles for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

11. (C) Summary. A debate over Fatah's past dominated discussions on the second day of the Sixth Congress, leaving little time to focus on preparations for leadership elections. It is possible that elections may slip a day (until 8/7) as a result. Discussions have not yet begun on the political program. On a positive note, a threatened walkout by Gaza delegates was averted, though the fundamental question of how to account for the absence of most of the Gaza contingent remains unresolved. Finally, reaction to Abu Mazen's speech among our contacts varied, but most said the leadership elections would be the ultimate barometer of success for the Congress, not the speeches. End Summary.

Second Day Focuses on Election and Program

12. (C) According to four participants, the second day of the Fatah General Congress focused on two issues: controversy over the outgoing Fatah Central Committee (FCC) report and preparations for leadership elections. During the morning session on August 5, when recently-returned Fatah official Abu Maher took the floor to deliver a speech on FCC activities since 1989, former General Intelligence (GI) Chief Tawfiq Tirawi interrupted him and demanded that the FCC submit a written report in stead of a speech. Tirawi also called for the FCC to be "tried" for the failure of the Fatah movement over the past twenty years. After intense applause, Abu Ala'a and Sa'eb Erekat countered that Abu Mazen's speech should be considered the written FCC report. Participants said this proposal was voted down by a show of hands, at which point Abu Mazen himself entered the room. (Fatah delegate Ahmad Sayyed told PolSpec that Tirawi was later involved in a shoving match with members of the Presidential Guard, after which his blood pressure rose to the point he was taken to a nearby health clinic.)

13. (C) Abu Mazen began his intervention by describing the Congress as a "great accomplishment," and praised the internal debate as healthy for the movement. However, according to our sources, when Abu Mazen tried to describe his speech at the opening session as the formal report of the FCC, delegate Husam Khader interrupted to call the FCC an "old and outdated body" and Abu Mazen a "regular member of the Congress like all of us here." Abu Mazen ordered Khader to leave but he refused. Ultimately Khader backed down from the confrontation and returned to his seat. However, our contacts said debate on the issue continued even after Abu Mazen departed from the session, and they predicted a special vote would take place on whether Abu Mazen's speech could substitute for the FCC report.

Timeline May Slip for Elections

¶4. (C) The controversy over the FCC report delayed plans to discuss other key issues, such as the political program and election preparations. Fatah sources told PolSpec the Congress may be extended one additional day (until August 7) as a result, with elections slipping until the final day. Another reason for delay was Abu Ala'a's decision to use the August 4 evening session to read aloud the names of all 2,267 delegates to confirm the presence of a quorum. The roll call ended near midnight, to the chagrin of our contacts.

¶5. (C) Meanwhile, a planned walkout by roughly 180 delegates (mainly from Gaza) affiliated with Mohammed Dahlan appears to have been averted, for now. As reported reftel, these delegates threatened to leave the Congress if a formula could not be found to account for the Gazans whose participation Hamas blocked in the leadership elections. FRC member Naser al-Qidwa told PolSpec he met with the group the evening of August 4 and discouraged such a walkout, arguing that such a move could backfire and marginalize them. Fatah officials told PolSpec a number of proposals are circulating informally to end the impasse, such as withholding a quota of seats for future elections at a "mini-Congress."

¶6. (C) PLO Executive Committee Secretary Yasir Abd Rabbo told the Consul General in an August 5 telcon that Abu Mazen's plan is to let the debate run a bit longer before tabling a proposal of his own. Abd Rabbo said the compromise would involve requiring all delegates to vote for at least two Gazans in the FCC elections. The new FCC would then appoint

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an additional four Gazans, in addition to the traditional appointments of a woman and a Christian.

Mixed Assessments of Abu Mazen's Speech

¶7. (C) Our contacts' assessments of Abu Mazen's inaugural speech varied widely. PM Salaam Fayyad told the Consul General on 8/5 "it was a dumb speech," adding that Abu Mazen had gone overboard in praising the legacy of the Tunis generation at the expense of the first intifada generation and Marwan Barghouti. Abd Rabbo was slightly more charitable. He told the Consul General that Abu Mazen "wanted to enhance his image by tying himself to Arafat and the movement's history." Nonetheless, Abd Rabbo admitted "it was a lousy speech" and said he had seen the final version too close to the event to do much with it.

¶8. (C) There was little convergence among the other sources we polled. Azariya mayor (and Fatah member) Issam Faraun praised the speech as setting an appropriate tone for the Congress, and expressed continued hope the leadership elections would produce a revitalized movement. However, he admitted there will be a gap between his expectations and the likely outcome. Pollster Khalil Shikaki said "Abu Mazen is no Yasir Arafat when it comes to delivery, but in the end the fact of the Congress is still a major achievement." He added that much depends on whether, and how, leadership elections are conducted. Zakaria al Qaq, al-Quds University's Vice President for External Affairs, said Abu Mazen's speech focused on the "fairy tale of history," adding "Abu Mazen used an Arafat technique - exhaust your audience with stories so you don't have to give them substance." He described the Congress as little more than a "festival" so far. Both al Qaq and Abd Rabbo came up with the same bottom line: the election results will determine whether Fatah had reformed, not the speeches.

WALLES